

THINK, PLAN, EAT LOCAL

THE MICHIGAN CULINARY TOURISM ALLIANCE WANTS YOU TO SERVE UP MICHIGAN-THEMED EVENTS. BY DIANNA STAMPLER

INTEREST IN MICHIGAN as a culinary tourism destination is growing. It only makes sense given that agriculture is the state's second leading industry at more than \$394 billion and tourism is third, at \$18.5 billion. Michigan also proudly ranks no. 2 in the nation for agricultural diversity, second only to California.

In January, the Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance was formed under the direction of the Michigan Department of Agriculture, Michigan Restaurant Association and Travel Michigan. The goals of this organization are to increase menu offerings of local products at restaurants across the state, increase sales and profitability for Michigan specialty crop producers and promote Michigan as a destination for culinary travel experiences.

One of the break-out sessions at the Pure Michigan Governor's Conference – Driving Tourism 2010, held May 6-7 at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, focused solely on Michigan's culinary tourism initiatives, and hopefully inspired attendees to think local whenever possible.

At this same conference at the JW Marriott in Grand Rapids in 2008, the culinary team from the Amway Hotel Collection went all out to showcase the bounty of Michigan. An entire "Taste of Michigan" reception featured countless items such as cherries, apples, potatoes and other food items, both in their raw and processed state. Locally crafted beers and Michigan-made wines were also part of the evening, as were Michigan sourced coffees and teas.

At the Grand Traverse Resort & Spa in Acme, just outside Traverse City, meeting planners can request a "Local Michigan Agricultural Products" list from the resort, which includes such items as Bibb lettuce from Zenner Farms in Kingsley and fresh pork belly from Sanders Meats in Custer. The resort even has Michigan menu items such as the Traverse City Break (cherry oatmeal cookies and brownies and local cherry apple cider) featured in the conference planning materials. Of course local wines and beers are a given.

The Secchia Institute for Culinary Education at Grand Rapids Community College is a leader when it comes to planning events with a Michigan flair and in educating its students about the benefits that can be reaped by doing so. In February 2010, the college hosted its popular Grand Culinary Affair, which this year focused on "The Tastes of Pure Michigan." College leaders enlightened not only their students but event attendees about keeping it local, sustainable farming practices, honoring the local farmers and supporting the local food chain. Among the featured products on the menu: raw milk cheeses from Meerman's in Coopersville, chickens from Otto's in Middleville and smoked whitefish from Carlson's in Leland.

As you begin planning a conference, meeting or social event, consider the benefits of keeping it local when it comes to food and beverages. It allows the culinary team planners are working with to often think outside the box and showcase their true talents; it keeps more money in the state; and it gives planners a chance to hold their head high as a proud Michigander. ☺



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